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Correspondence (1856-1859) in the archives of the Scottish Association for Marine Science to the Rev. A. N. Somerville and Alexander Somerville on entomological matters

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ABSTRACT

Attention is drawn to some nineteenth-century correspondence addressed to the Reverend Alexander Neil Somerville and to his eldest son Alexander Somerville housed in the archives of the Scottish Association for Marine Science, at Oban, concerning Lepidoptera. Previously unknown letters from Henry Tibbats Stainton, Edward Buckell and Thomas Chapman are presented in full and interpreted in the light of modern entomological understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst perusing the archives of the Scottish Association for Marine Science (S. A. M. S., Dunstaffnage, Oban) for information on nineteenth century Clyde naturalists I encountered a folder of correspondence relating to the Somervilles, father and son. Seemingly the father, the Reverend Alexander Neil Somerville, DD (1813-1889), was interested enough in entomology in the mid-nineteenth century for his name to be listed in Stainton's *Entomologist's Annual* but little other evidence exists of his entomological leanings. It is also possible that he had himself listed as a proxy for his eldest son Alexander (1842-1907) who may otherwise have been deemed too young to be taken seriously as an entomologist at that time. Although the son's natural history interests were initially entomological, eventually they gravitated towards conchology (he became President of the Conchological Society of Great Britain and Ireland from 1901 to 1902) (Knight, 1908), marine biology (Moore & Gibson, 2007) and botany (mainly latterly) (Hill, 1907). The Somervilles had entomological contact with the great Henry Tibbats Stainton (1822-1892), while the son subsequently had an extensive conchological correspondence with James Thomas Marshall (1842-1922). I am presenting a consideration of that more extensive conchological correspondence elsewhere (Moore, 2009).

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The Reverend Alexander Neil Somerville, DD (1813-1889) (Fig. 1) was a prominent Free Church minister. He had charge of the Anderston Free Church in Glasgow (built 1844) for forty years. At the age of sixty-four he resigned his pastorate and was commissioned 'Evangelist at Large' by the Glasgow Evangelistic Association, a role he played for the remaining twelve years of his life (Knight, 1980). The death in Africa of David Livingstone (1813-1873) had a huge impact on Victorian society. The impulse to missionary endeavour in far-flung places was inspired in large measure by his example. Somerville was Secretary of the Glasgow Bible Society and was elected Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland (1886-1887). A prominent and influential Scottish churchman, his missionary zeal took him to Spain, India, Australia and Russia and to minister to the Jews of Eastern Europe (Smith, 1890). Among all this other activity, his entomological interests seem to have been minor; they certainly have not aroused comment hitherto. His 1890 publication, *Precious seed sown in many lands: sermons,* contains a biographical sketch.

According to Glasgow's register of births, his son, Alexander Somerville, B.Sc., F.L.S. (1842-1907) (Fig. 2) was born 15 May 1842 (not 1843 as given by Knight, 1908 or 25 March 1842 as given by Jackson, as 'B. D. J.', 1908) at Barony, Lanark. His home address in his youth was 328 Renfrew St, Glasgow (see below). He did three sessions at Glasgow University's Old College during the period 1857 to 1860, where he took a mixture of Arts (Latin, Greek, Logic) and Science courses (anatomy, physiology, zoology, botany). The 1861 census gave Alexander Somerville's occupation as Merchant's Clerk (then aged 19). After a few years working in Scotland he proceeded to India where he spent fifteen years in the service of Messrs Mackinnon, Mackenzie & Co (a firm involved in the coastal trade in the Bay of Bengal, chartering sailing ships plying between India and Australia). This accounts for his not being mentioned in the 1871 or 1881 Scottish censuses. His health suffered in India and he returned to Scotland, re-enlisting in Glasgow University, then newly (after 1870) re-sited at Gilmorehill, where in due course he was awarded his B.Sc. degree (19 November 1885; aged 42) (Addison, 1898). According to his matriculation slip (based on information kindly supplied by Ms Alma Topen (Archivist, Glasgow University)), he studied mainly medical courses in 1883-1885 (senior anatomy, practical anatomy, physiology, plus English literature). From this same source Somerville's address was then 34 Granby Terrace in Glasgow. His subsequent scientific career

in conchology will be dealt with in detail elsewhere (Moore, 2009).

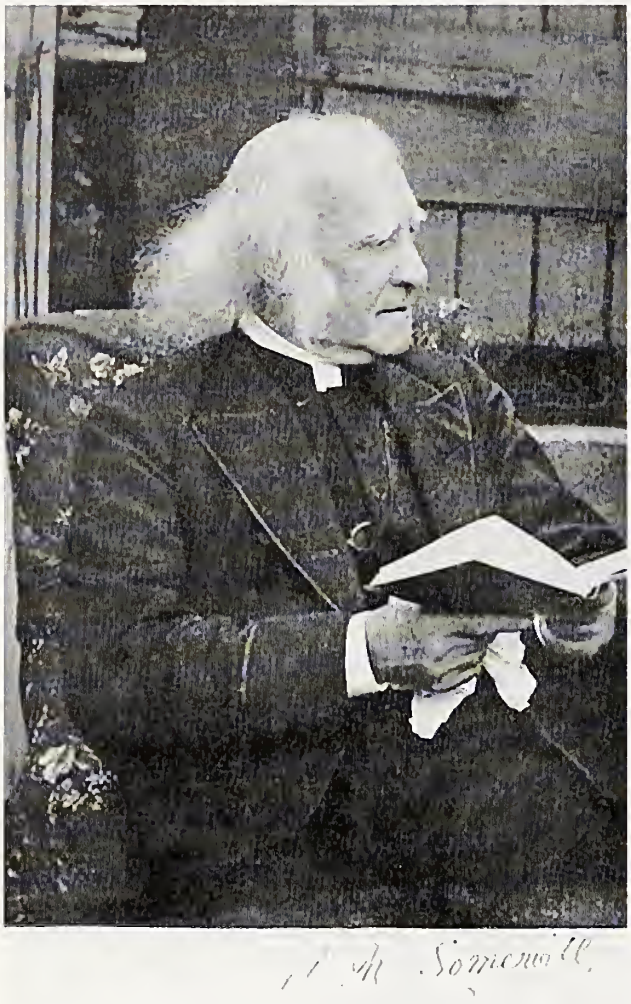

Fig. 1. The Reverend Alexander Neil Somerville, D.D. (date 1880; reproduced with permission from Chris Knight's genealogy pages; http://chrisknight.info/genealogy/showmedia.php?mediaID=145&medialinkID=174).

ENTOMOLOGICAL LETTERS TO THE SOMERVILLES IN THE S.A.M.S. ARCHIVE (OBAN)

The earliest letter in Oban's Somerville archive, dated 20 June 1856, is from H. T. Stainton, that stalwart of the Entomological Society of London (*inter alia*). It is contained within an envelope stamped with a penny red and addressed to "Master Alexander Somerville, Rev. A. N. Somerville, Whiting Bay, Lamlash, Arran, N.B." Alexander would only have been 14 years old then. Clearly, Master Alexander had been sending material to Stainton (doubtless encouraged by his father). It is typical that the guru of entomology was treating this young teenager seriously as a naturalist having access to the up-to-date literature (see Discussion). The manual referred to would have been Stainton's, at the time recently published handbook, entitled *A manual of British butterflies and moths* (Stainton, 1856).

Dear Sir,

Here comes a letter from Mr Stainton! Ain't it jolly? Your blue butterfly is most likely Alexis ♀, has it not on the underside a row of red spots. Alexis has no red spots. See the table of the genus in the Manual.

The Emperor moth is a beautiful species, but the ♀ is to my notions prettier even than the male. Sulphur is a very good way of killing insects. I used to kill all mine with it 10 years ago; it is very simple and very effective. I only injure those which have green colours.

Your insects were nicely squashed by the careful stamping of the Post Office; but I recognise Hipparchia [crossed out and Lasiommata superimposed] Megaera, Rumia crataegata, & Argyrolepia Baumanniana.

Believe me Dear Sir,

Yours very truly

H. T. Stainton

P.S. Do you mean to catch Ligea, I should be very glad of a specimen.

The Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus* (Rottemburg), was referred to as The Alexis (Rennie, 1832). The Emperor moth, *Saturnia pavonina* (L.), is common on heaths throughout Scotland. Males are predominantly brown whilst the larger females are mainly dove grey, both with eyespots. No one uses sulphur to kill insects nowadays. It produces noxious fumes that turn green shades a dull yellow / brown. *Lasiommata megaera* (L.) is the Wall Brown butterfly, which is much reduced in England now but still occurs sparsely around the coast of southwest Scotland. Pre-1970 it was recorded from the south coast of Arran and may still breed there but there is no recent confirmation. *Rumia crataegata* is now *Opisthograptis luteolata* (L.), the Brimstone moth, which is very common throughout lowland Scotland. Although the species name '*Baumanniana*' has been used to refer to *Aethes hartmanniana* (Clerck), as has the genus name '*Argyrolepia*', it has also been used for *Aethes piercei* Obraztsov. The latter seems much more likely. It is thinly but widely distributed on species-rich grassland and grass / heath throughout Scotland, whereas *A. hartmanniana* has not been reliably recorded here. *Erebia ligea* (L.), the Arran Brown, is hotly disputed. There are specimens reputed to have been taken on Arran and some other loealities in south western Scotland but no properly authenticated records. It is not clear whether the G.P.O.-mangled material of *Lasiommata megaera* referred to was initially misidentified by Stainton as the rather similar-looking satyrid *Hipparchia [semele]*, the Grayling, or whether he had deleted *Hipparchia* as being superseded as a generic name for *L. megaera*.

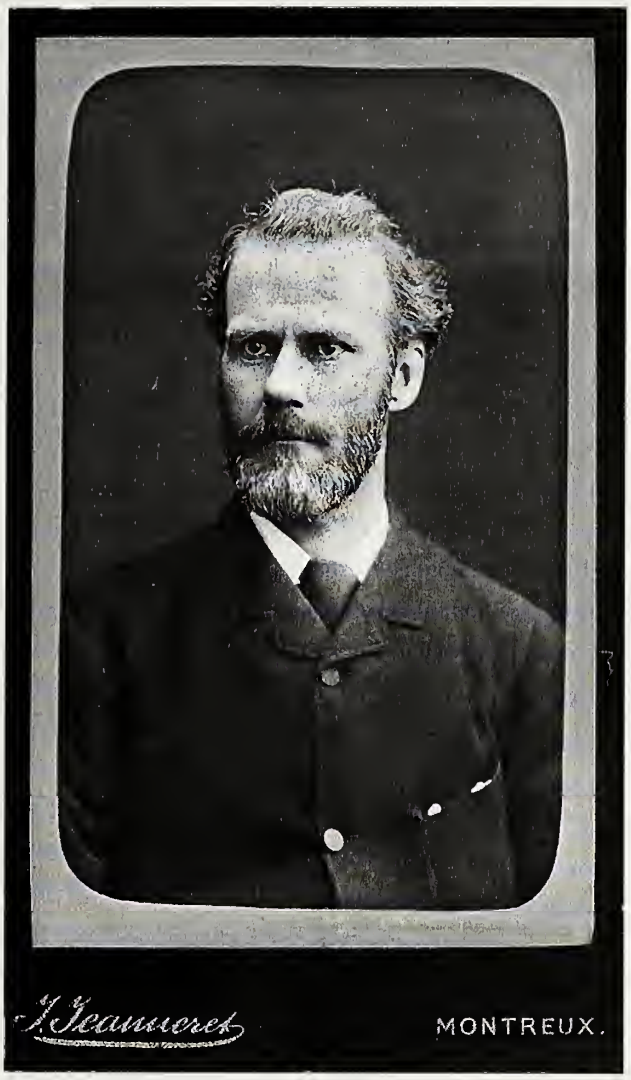

Fig. 2. Alexander Somerville, B.Sc., F.L.S. "carte de visite"-style photograph (reproduced with permission of The Linnean Society of London).

The other communication from Stainton, again retained in its original envelope, was addressed to "Mr Alexander Somerville, Rev. A. N. Somerville, Whiting Bay, Lamlash, Arran, N.B." with the Arran address on the envelope subsequently scored through and "Glasgow" written boldly adjacent. Obviously, the Somervilles had flitted from Arran. But, as clearly, the father was sufficiently well known that "Glasgow" alone would suffice to find him (as, patently, it must have done). All things considered, the Whiting Bay, Arran, address of the correspondence below must have been a holiday home (its date falling within the period of his Glasgow ministry).

This communication is a printed circular (with various enclosures) addressed from "Mountfield, Lewisham October 23rd, 1856" requesting that The Rev. A. N. Somerville confirm his address for the Supplemental List of British Entomologists for Stainton's *Entomologists's Annual* of 1857 as being Whiting Bay, Lamlash, Arran (perhaps his entomology was reserved for holidays). The enclosures are two small folded flyers mainly advertising Stainton's contemporary works then being published by Van Voorst.

Written on a crest-embossed notelet addressed to Mr A. Somerville is a letter also from an amateur entomologist in Ireland

Dublin May 18, 1859

My dear Sir,

My knowledge of the early stages of Minos is I regret to say incomplete – I have had the eggs and young larva by thousands but failed to rear them, they eat Lotus corniculatus [bird's foot trefoil], but I think it cannot be the proper food. I suspect they hibernate and feed up during the early autumn, but never having visited the Irish locality whilst they were feeding I can tell you nothing certainly of the larva or its habits – The cocoon is oval, earth coloured & not unlike that of Eriogaster lanestris only smaller & of a weaker structure. Not attached to the stem of a plant, but in the 3 or 4 cases in which alone I have been able to find it placed out on the surface of the ground, once attached to the underside of a stone. I have spent hours searching for it on a hillside when the moth was emerging daily by the hundred and can only explain my want of success by supposing it is usually subterranean – I shall be very glad to hear the results of your investigations – the moth appears with us during the last week of June. Filipendulae occurs in the same locality, but in very much smaller numbers than Minos – Minos is very fond of the wild thyme. I have seen 20 on a patch not larger than the palm of my hand – Wishing you a pleasant and successful excursion, I am Dear Sir Yours truly

Edward Buckell

'Minos' was previously used as the specific name for *Zygaena purpuralis* (Brünnich), the Transparent Burnet moth. It is hardly surprising the larvae died; they live on thyme (*Thymus drucei*). The moth is found on heavily grazed coastal grassland from Talisker Bay, Skye down to Largieburn, Kintyre. Eggars are so-called perhaps because of their oval cocoons. *Eriogaster lanestris*, the Small Eggar, does indeed have a cocoon that is similar in general shape to that of *Z. purpuralis*. The six-spot burnet, *Zygaena filipendulae* (L.), is a moth that does feed mainly on bird's foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus* L.). It is often found together with *Z. purpuralis*, and both are fond of 'nectaring' on thyme flowers.

From the father of a teenage Thomas Algernon Chapman (1842-1921) we have a letter (below) intriguingly directed to an Oban address (another holiday venue perhaps?). Chapman's father was a man who was stated by Salmon (2000: 176) to have been a parent "genuinely devoted to natural history". The Chapmans, father and son, wrote several papers on butterflies under joint authorship. The young Chapman was destined to become an FRS (and correspondent of Darwin) with a specialist interest in Lepidoptera,

31 May 1859
Bathurst Street
Glasgow

Dear Sir,

I am glad to hear that you have commenced your month in the north so auspiciously. The weather has favoured you, and is doubtless still fine with you, for the barometer keeps very steady.

So far as I know, Strenia Clathraria, and P. Globularia are new to Scotland. V. Macularia was taken near Yoker, I think by Mr Scott, but I never heard of its being found anywhere else in Scotland. As the Hebrides are virgin ground to the Lepidopterist, we shall look for some novelties from those hyperborean islands.

Perhaps you may pick up some Hadena exulis (= H. assimilis) of which Dr Standinger brought a great lot from Iceland. He got a number of the pupae out of moss. The only hint I can give you, is to try sugar on a dark cloudy, windy night, if raining it is none the worse should there be favourable trees for the operation.

Algernon and I were two days at Ardentinny, & on our return found several of our best moths had emerged and spoil themselves, particularly two palpina & other large Saturnia from Canada. On the hill we found just one L. Salicaria, did you meet with any on Ben Cruachan. Don't forget to look for the rare Carabi in the western islands. There is a man at Oban, who owes us an account which I fear we shall never get. His name is Mr Wilson, and he keeps or did keep the Argyll Arms hotel there. If you go to Oban, & have time I wish you would learn what you can about him, if he be still in Oban & what he is doing.

I shall be glad to have another report of your progress at your early convenience, and with best wishes in every way,

Believe me
Yours very truly
Thos Chapman
Mr Alex Somerville
Oban

Strenia clathraria is now called *Chiasmia clathrata* (L.), the Latticed Heath moth. It is surprising that this was considered as having been new to Scotland. It is a reasonably widespread species, especially in coastal grassland, in western Scotland and elsewhere. *Procus globularia* must be a mistake. It is the Scarce Forester moth, now *Jordanita globularia* (Hübner) that, in Britain, is only found on chalk grassland in southern England. The similar and easily confused Forester moth, *Adscita statices* (L.), is found locally in wet grassland in southwestern Scotland, including the Oban area, and is most likely the species encountered. *V. macularia* is now called *Pseudopanthera macularia* (L.), the Speckled Yellow moth. It is widely but locally common in western Scotland. *Hadena exulis* (= *H. assimilis*) is now known as *Apamea zeta assimilis* (Doubleday), the Northern Arches moth. This subspecies occurs in highland mainland Scotland. It is predominantly black or dark brown whereas the brown, more hairy form found mainly on Shetland is called the Exile and is *A. z. marmorata* (Zetterstedt) but this form used to be known as '*exulis*'. The Iceland moths will have been the brown form, whereas those expected on the western mainland hills would be black. In the north of the mainland there is something of a cline towards the brown form. 'Palpina' is *Pterostoma palpina* (Clerck), the Pale Prominent. This is a scarce, local but widespread species in Scotland. 'Saturnia' is a term used for relatives of our *S. pavonina*, the Emperor moth, all closely related to 'silk moths'. 'L. Salicaria' is now called *Nebula salicata* (Hubn.), the Striped Twin-spot Carpet moth. It is found widely but locally in highland Scotland. 'Carabi' refers to ground beetles of the family Carabidae.

There are two additional slips in the Oban archives (one dated Wednesday Sept. 8 1858) both from a Miss Wilkinson (of St Andrews, Guernsey) requesting exchanges of insect specimens; one of which is addressed to "A. Somerville Esq, 328 Renfrew Street, Glasgow". No further entomological correspondence resides in the S.A.M.S. Somerville repository.

DISCUSSION

Stainton, a man possessed of an ample fortune, happily remained one who was conscious that "property has its duties as well as its rights" (Salmon, 2000). He particularly welcomed contacts from young collectors (those over 14 anyway) and his home at Mountsfield, now no longer standing, was a renowned gathering place for entomologists (Salmon, 2000: 163). He used to publish (in his highly readable *Entomologist's Weekly Intelligencer*) 'At Home' invitations to young entomologists - whether known to him or not - to inspect his insect collections (Salmon, 2000: 39). Swapping specimens between naturalists to supplement cabinet collections was then greatly in vogue and was pursued with philatelic passion, encouraged by Stainton.

It is evident that Alexander Neil Somerville had encouraged his son in the pursuit of entomology but that his son had decided at some later date to divert his main attention towards conchology (Knight, 1908). I can find no reference to A. N. Somerville ever having published on natural history; his interest may simply have been solely as a conduit to encourage his son's biological leanings, or may perhaps have extended no further than insect collecting as a curiosity.

There are eight specimens listed in the Kelvingrove Museum's registers of Lepidoptera donated by A. Somerville in 1890. These are all different species of *Danais* from various parts of the world (and contain no Scottish specimens). It is not clear whether these all still exist (Richard Sutcliffe, pers. comm.).

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